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Asia’s Democracy Backlash

JOSHUA KURLANTZICK

So intense is the chaos in the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka that to an outsider it often seems miraculous that the city actually functions. At intersections, mobs of rickshaws, motorcycles, and luxury cars vie for space with vendors and homeless people wandering in all directions. Sidewalks are crowded with so many people—the megacity is one of the largest in the world—that you must push through the pack just to move.

Normally, the city’s politics mirrors its daily life. For years, university students allied with either of the two major parties have led boisterous rallies and street protests at election time, demonstrations often so fevered that they descend into violence. Vendors sell huge numbers of vernacular and English-language newspapers, which offer tens of thousands of words of political coverage.

But over the past two years, Dhaka—or at least its politics—has quieted considerably. In January 2007, a caretaker government preparing for a new Bangladeshi election stepped down, probably because of pressure from the military, and the army soon asserted itself even more. Working only barely behind the scenes, it organized a new government, declared a state of emergency, and soon detained thousands of political activists, putatively as part of a campaign to eliminate graft from politics. After promises to hold a new election, the military and its caretaker regime scheduled voting for the late date of December 2008.

Bangladesh is hardly unique in experiencing undemocratic developments. Asia once was regarded as the vanguard of a global wave of democratization that, over the past three decades,

has swept through southern Europe, Latin America, and Africa as well. In recent years, however, Asia has witnessed a democracy backlash. Across the region, armed forces once believed confined to their barracks have begun to reassert their power. Quasi-authoritarian rulers in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, the Philippines, and other nations have drastically strengthened the power of the state, unleashing security forces on political opponents, using emergency decrees to consolidate power, and cracking down on civil society. And in the region’s most repressive states, such as Myanmar (formerly Burma), progress toward greater freedom appears to have stalled entirely.

THE FREEDOM FAÇADE

South and Southeast Asia in the late 1990s and early in this decade rode the crest of a wave of democratization that encompassed much of the developing world. During the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, protesters in Indonesia toppled the long-ruling dictator Suharto and established a new, multiparty political system. In Malaysia at roughly the same time, protesters lashed out at the authoritarian rule of Mahathir Mohamad. Liberalization spread to East Timor, then a part of Indonesia, and after a bloody conflict Timor won its independence and established a nascent democracy. Cambodia emerged from years of civil war to hold a series of elections in the 1990s.

Even long-suffering Myanmar, ruled since 1962 by the military, seemed ready to change, as the junta released pro-democracy opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest in 2002 and allowed her to tour the country. She drew massive crowds hopeful for political change and proclaimed “a new dawn for the country.”

As economies grew rapidly and publics became more politically active, nations such as Thailand and Bangladesh drew up liberal constitutions supposedly designed to strengthen civil society,

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protect minority rights, and check the power of entrenched actors like the military and powerful business interests. In vibrant Asian cities like Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur, where rapid growth had produced towering skylines, sleek new roads, and flashy shopping districts, the idea of military coups now seemed obsolete.

But recent years have revealed that some of this democratization was a façade. (To be sure, Asia's longest-established democracies, Japan and India, suffer few of these weaknesses; and South Korea and Taiwan, though unruly, do not seem at risk of backsliding.) In some cases, the apparent vibrancy reflected merely economic liberalization, and democracy had not sunk deep roots.

Quasi-authoritarian states like Singapore and Malaysia did understand the need for financial transparency, since that was critical to attracting the foreign investment that has powered their economic miracles. Yet Singapore and Malaysia—like China and, to some extent, Vietnam—have managed to build walls around their political processes, promoting financial and economic transparency while using subtle means to undermine political liberalization. They have held highly controlled elections while allowing few other facets of democracy, such as union organizing, independent media, or trade associations. Foreign investors, who care mostly about financial probity, offer little protest about these dual policies, and have said nothing when countries like Malaysia jail activists.

Even countries in South and Southeast Asia that seem more democratic than Malaysia still have papered over major flaws. Few have established effective methods of probing state corruption or electoral fraud. Despite holding elections and writing constitutions, many Asian nations have never assimilated a central premise of democracy—the idea that once a party loses it must respect the system by serving as a loyal opposition, working within the established political framework and honoring constitutional rules.

Instead, from the Philippines to Bangladesh to Thailand—where large popular movements in the past have overthrown dictators—individuals and organized groups dissatisfied with the results of free elections have continually taken their cases to the streets. Because these nations constantly rely on “people power” to change governments, they

have invested little in building democratic institutions or in promoting equitable development.

In Manila, street protests nicknamed People Power 2 toppled President Joseph Estrada in 2001 and brought to power his vice president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. Although Estrada had been far from flawless in office—he packed his administration with unqualified cronies and became enmeshed in vast corruption scandals—he had been popularly elected. Three years later, similar demonstrations almost brought Arroyo down.

In Bangladesh, political parties run by two women who reportedly detest each other, Sheikh Hasina Wazed and Begum Khaleda Zia, have taken this unwillingness to capitulate to rules to a perverse extreme. When one party wins an election, the opposition often responds with waves of paralyzing strikes and protests, attempting to make the country ungovernable. These strikes only foster political violence. Numerous assaults on party gatherings have occurred, including a 2004 grenade attack against Sheikh Hasina's entourage in which 21 people were killed.

Asians, meanwhile, have not entirely banished the men in green. Although militaries rarely intervened in domestic politics in the late 1990s and early in this decade, few Asian countries have established

complete civilian control over their armed forces. (In several nations, like Pakistan and Myanmar, the military never truly left politics.) In many South Pacific nations such as Fiji, military officers have constantly threatened coups, sometimes successfully toppling governments. In the Philippines and Bangladesh (as in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, among other countries), security forces have continued to operate unencumbered by laws, killing suspected opponents of whichever government is in power, running off-the-books businesses, and trafficking in weapons and drugs.

THE FADING BEACON

At the same time, over the past decade the balance of power among external actors in Southeast and South Asia has shifted dramatically. For decades, the United States was the major external power in Asia, and in the late 1990s and early in this decade Washington rhetorically committed itself to pushing for democratization and better governance in the region.

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In the past five years, however, this commitment has weakened. The war on terror has consumed the White House's attention and undermined America's moral standing. Demanding counterterrorism cooperation in Asia, the United States often has ignored efforts by countries such as Cambodia and Malaysia to use the war on terror to crack down on critics—for example, through Malaysia's Internal Security Act, a colonial-era relic that allows for detention without trial.

Focused on Iraq, the United States also has had little time to confront problems like the ongoing human rights crisis in Myanmar, where the army's scorched-earth tactics—which include widespread rape—have displaced nearly 1 million people in the eastern part of the country, and where the junta this year held, just days after a catastrophic cyclone hit, a sham national “referendum” designed to strengthen its control.

Washington did help to push Myanmar onto the agenda of the United Nations Security Council after the junta's crackdown on the so-called Saffron Revolution in 2007. But when the Security Council refused to take tough action, the administration of George W. Bush declined to invest more time and resources in the issue. Some US officials suggested that China should lead the effort to bring reform to Myanmar, a task for which Beijing has shown little appetite; it was China, in fact, that blocked UN action against Myanmar. The United States, meanwhile, does not even have an ambassador in the country.

More generally, scandals at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, and other prisons have damaged the United States' image as a guarantor of freedom. Authoritarian nations like China and Russia, both of which are flexing their muscles in Asia, now have a ready response to American criticism of their human rights records—the United States, they argue, is no better. (For years, China has responded to the State Department's annual report on human rights in China with its own paper on human rights in America; Beijing now has considerable evidence it can marshal in its report.)

In the late 1990s, many reformers and activists in Asia wanted to be associated with the United States and its blossoming democracy promotion outfits, like the National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute, and the International Republican Institute. By the mid-2000s, America's image in Asia had plummeted so far that many activists took pains not to be linked to US funding. And President Bush's linking of de-

mocracy promotion to the war in Iraq led citizens of many nations to associate democratization with images of turmoil televised from Baghdad.

MODEL COMPETITORS

As America's standing has weakened, China and Russia have made impressive gains in the region. Indeed, they are advertising their undemocratic systems—according to which they have moderately liberalized their economies while avoiding concurrent political reform—as development models that Asian countries should emulate. China and Russia also emphasize a doctrine of noninterference, arguing that countries should not intervene in other nations' internal affairs—interference that could include sanctioning human rights violators or supporting pro-democracy movements.

Beijing in particular, employing more effective diplomacy than the United States—and with a growing aid program that now outstrips American assistance in countries like the Philippines, Myanmar, and Cambodia—has transformed its image in Asia from that of an economic and political threat to a more benign neighbor, and even a model. China promotes its style of development through a rising number of training programs for top leaders and mid-level technocrats in countries like Vietnam, Laos, and Pakistan. It also provides sufficient aid and investment to authoritarian nations to render meaningless Western efforts to influence the regime in Myanmar, for example, or to pressure the Cambodian government into improving its human rights climate.

Russia, for its part, has begun to wield greater influence in Central Asia, where many top leaders still have Soviet backgrounds. With the growing cash hoard it is accumulating because of the high price of oil, Russia has funded the creation of new NGO-like organizations that *fight* democracy promotion efforts in Central Asia, while providing assistance to Central Asian autocrats and training to some of their security forces.

Some Asian countries appear to be listening to Beijing and Moscow. Leaders of nations such as Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam have begun to debate how they can apply a Chinese model to their own nations. At the same time that Beijing promotes a nondemocratic model, China's growing power also ties the United States' hands in Asia. When faced with antidemocratic behavior across the region, Washington must be increasingly careful how it responds, for fear of pushing these countries more firmly into Beijing's orbit.

REVENGE OF THE AUTOCRATS

Over the past five years, all these trends have coalesced, creating Asia's democracy backlash. The dangerous mix of years of venal and corrupt rule in countries like Bangladesh and the Philippines, combined with the failure to build institutions for funneling protest into peaceful channels, has finally exploded. In East Timor, disgruntled young men descended last year on the streets of Dili, the low-rise capital, to fight it out with knives and slingshots. Until foreign troops intervened, rioters burned block after city block, leaving Dili a morass of charred and gutted buildings. In Bangladesh in 2007, thousands of protesters charged through Dhaka's alleys and tin-roofed slum dwellings. They attacked stores and clashed with riot police and thousands of soldiers, battling with stones and sticks until demonstrators fled the scene, their faces bleeding and clothes ripped apart.

Militaries have asserted themselves in Asian nations beyond Bangladesh. In Thailand, another supposedly consolidated democracy, the army seized power in a September 2006 coup. The coup followed months of street demonstrations against the government of then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a popularly elected leader who had used his power to neuter the courts, civil society, and the Thai bureaucracy, and to launch a war against drugs that killed thousands of innocent citizens. The Thai military soon shredded the country's reformist constitution, written in 1997.

In Fiji, the military seized power in December 2006 and amassed emergency powers, announcing that it did so to battle corruption and that it would hold elections in far-off 2010. The Fijian armed forces then censored the press and arrested at least two dozen prominent activists.

At first, many liberals embraced these military interventions. In Bangladesh, crowds initially cheered the takeover as a balm against the corruption and political violence that had created chaos in the run-up to the January 2007 election, in which at least 45 people were killed. In a poll taken in October 2006 by the Bangladeshi newspaper *Daily Star*, most respondents had expressed anger at "inter-party bickering, unbridled corruption [and] total lack of governance."

Likewise, many middle class Bangkok residents hailed the coup-makers. Thai girls celebrated the

takeover by placing flowers in army tanks in the capital. Reform-minded Thai liberals (and some Western commentators), from newspaper editors to academics, praised the military for stepping in.

The generals, however, proved incapable of ruling. Asian military rulers who take power today must deal with far more complex and globalized economies than was the case in the 1960s and 1970s. They also must deal with publics that have become accustomed to democracy, and are less willing to abide by martial law and bans on political activity.

In Fiji, the government reserve bank admitted that the coup had depressed economic development. In Thailand, the army vacillated between reassuring investors and implementing measures such as currency interventions and new protectionist laws that terrified many foreign businesses. The military also demonstrated it did not understand how to interact with the modern media: The army cracked down on the press in 2007 and even banned CNN when it aired an interview with Thaksin, even as activists in Bangkok became more openly critical of the military regime.

REFORMS UNDER SIEGE

At the same time that these outright coups against democracies have been occurring, many of the region's other governments have used subtler means of undermining political freedoms. In quasi-authoritarian Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen has consolidated near-total power over the past five years, using the legal system, which he dominates, to arrest opponents and silence prominent critics for defaming the government. He also has co-opted nearly the entire political opposition, so that his party is left with virtually no one arrayed against it in the legislature. A possible new gusher of oil to be exploited off Cambodia's shores will only add to Hun Sen's power, since it will further decrease the influence of foreign donors over his regime. In Vietnam, the government has arrested pro-democracy lawyers and other activists trying to build a political opposition.

Sri Lanka also has become a major offender. In December 2006, after a peace process with separatist Tamil Tigers collapsed, the government issued new emergency laws giving it greater power

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to control the media and civil society. Since then, the conservative Sri Lankan government, which is allied with Sinhalese hard-line nationalist parties, has become more and more repressive, using the civil war against the Tamil Tigers to crack down more broadly on legitimate dissent.

Over the past two years, according to Amnesty International, at least 10 journalists in Sri Lanka have been killed, while several others have disappeared or have been jailed under the emergency laws and tortured. The disappearances have extended beyond writers: Last year, the UN's working group on disappearances documented more such vanishings in Sri Lanka than in any other country in the world. Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan government has been expelling Tamils from the capital, Colombo, for no reason other than their ethnic background. The situation is unlikely to improve soon, as the government has recently stepped up its war against the Tamil Tigers, attacking them across the north of the country with heavy troop deployments.

The Philippines, a longstanding bastion of democracy, also has backslid badly. This year Freedom House downgraded its rating for the Philippines from "free" to "partly free." Indeed, it warned, "Asia's oldest democracy has become increasingly dysfunctional." Citing vast corruption and potential rigging of voting machinery, Freedom House also alleges that the Philippine military has had a hand in the killings of hundreds of activists, particularly left-leaning activists, in recent years. Journalists have been targets, with a rising number of reporters murdered as well. Two years ago, too, President Arroyo invoked emergency rule and then used that legislation to arrest many anti-government activists.

In Myanmar, of course, the regime responded to the 2007 Saffron Revolution with a brutal and bloody crackdown, after which thousands of monks and other activists were killed or tossed in prison. Then the junta exploited the devastating May 2008 cyclone to consolidate its hold on power, resisting all international efforts to use the disaster to push for political reform.

THE JAKARTA MODEL

Still, the trend is not all negative. In Thailand in 2007, a year after the coup, voters did elect a new government. The period spent under military rule left the country in such turmoil, however, that it now faces a near future of unstable governments and, possibly, frequent elections. In recent months,

street protests have continued to dominate Bangkok, leading to clashes with security forces and even a protester takeover of the prime minister's offices. The elected prime minister, Samak Sundaravej, was forced out of office in September 2008, though his party still controlled the government.

In Malaysia, elections early this year, in which opposition parties won a far larger share of the vote than normal, suggested a possible opening of the political system. The kingdom of Bhutan held its first democratic elections in March 2008. And in Nepal, autocratic rule by the monarchy has given way to a democratic process, although recent elections brought into the government former Maoist insurgents, already known for their harsh repression of dissent.

But one young Asian democracy stands out. A decade ago, Indonesian protesters carrying firebombs and machetes rampaged through downtown Jakarta, furious over years of political repression and the country's impending economic collapse. Many took out their anger on Indonesia's Chinese minority, which controlled a high percentage of the nation's wealth. Mobs focused on ethnic Chinese-owned businesses such as shopping malls and gold stores, and men on motorcycles led some of the rioters to selected Chinese-owned shops, where they locked the proprietors inside and burned the buildings to the ground. Perhaps as many as 70,000 Chinese Indonesians fled the country, and many more escaped Jakarta for quieter parts of the archipelago, like Bali.

Other types of inter-ethnic and inter-religious violence raged through remote regions such as Aceh and the Maluku Islands, where warring bands of men chopped off their enemies' heads and posted them on spikes alongside roads.

Only a decade later, Indonesia has made astonishing strides, and can claim to have become the most stable democracy in Southeast Asia. Leaders have been pushing to enshrine minority rights, opening the political field to ethnic Chinese politicians: At least 30 Indonesian Chinese ran for parliament in 2004 elections.

And the acceptance of minority rights, in a nation where 10 years ago mobs burned ethnic Chinese alive, is but one sign of Indonesia's transformation. The government of President Susilio Bambang Yudhyono has tried to inculcate a stronger democratic culture. Yudhyono, himself a former general, was elected in 2004 in the first direct presidential poll in Indonesian history, and since then he has led a truly progressive government.

Rather than focusing on the elite, capital-centered politics of the kind found in Manila or Bangkok, the administration has built democratic culture from the grassroots, aggressively decentralizing power and bringing more control over local politics to local politicians, while also offering greater autonomy to regions of the country like Aceh, which suffered a 30-year-long separatist war. Thus far, though the region's erstwhile rebels have engaged in sporadic firefights, the peace process in Aceh has mostly held, with rebels laying down arms, the Indonesian military withdrawing troops from the region, and Aceh holding local elections.

The decentralization has strengthened and stabilized rural democracy. A report by *Asia Times* found that in recent years voters have removed nearly 40 percent of local-level incumbents, fostering a healthy climate of accountability. Local-level democracy, *Asia Times* noted, is also healing religious differences and reducing the threat of political Islam, since Muslims and Christians are teaming up to form local tickets. And, combined with economic decentralization, the political decentralization has provided provincial and local governments with more resources, which they can use to improve social welfare.

Under Yudhyono, the state has strengthened Indonesian institutions designed to hold powerful politicians accountable. The president, for example, has backed court decisions that overturned Internal Security Act–like laws that protected Indonesian leaders from criticism and had been used in the past to jail political opponents. Increased accountability in turn has strengthened average Indonesians' belief in the democratic system.

DEMOCRATIC INROADS

Almost alone among Southeast Asian leaders, Yudhyono also has realized that Asian nations must push for democracy among their neighbors if political liberalization is to entrench itself in the region. He has recognized that the most antidemocratic countries, like Myanmar, breed the type of instability that spreads transnational

problems like drugs and illegal migration to the rest of Asia.

While most Southeast Asian leaders avoid even talking about Myanmar, Yudhyono has openly warned Myanmar officials that their country must move faster on its constitution-drafting process and work toward implementing democracy. In Thailand and even India, by contrast, leaders said little after the Saffron Revolution crackdown. India's petroleum minister even visited Myanmar to sign new contracts while the Saffron protests were still going on.

The recent changes within Indonesia have proved popular with the public. Opinion polls not only give Yudhyono high marks; they also strongly and repeatedly endorse democracy. In one comprehensive poll conducted by the Indonesia Survey Institute, 82 percent of respondents said that they supported democracy—even as Thais in Bangkok welcomed military rule. Indonesian opposition parties also have proved

willing to resolve electoral losses within the political system, rather than demanding the overthrow of the government.

Clearly Indonesia still faces high hurdles, including military officers reluctant to

give up powers they gained during the 30-year Suharto era, and judges too often unwilling to punish military abuses. Before Yudhyono stands, as expected, for reelection in 2009, he will have to build a more consolidated and organized party around his progressive values to ensure that his ideas live on.

Yet Indonesia's transformation offers examples to other Asian states of how to consolidate a vibrant democracy. Indeed, before the region's democracy backlash gains more strength, progressive leaders from Cambodia to Bangladesh would be wise to pay attention to Jakarta. The United States, too, must pay more attention to a region that is economically dynamic and once seemed on the edge of total democratization. If Washington backs antidemocrats, it abandons its image as a guarantor of freedoms, and opens the door wider for other actors, like China, to make greater gains in the region. ■

Economic transparency in Southeast Asia has not necessarily signified political liberalization.
